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RESOLVING CONFLICT

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(Replaces OMAFRA Factsheet *Community Readiness for Economic Development — Resolving Conflict* Order No. 01-037)

Conflict is a **positive** element of all groups. Without it, people would not be challenged to think beyond their everyday, routine boundaries. When a variety of people with different perspectives, values, experiences, education, lifestyles and interests come together, differences abound. That diversity can enrich the discussion, the ideas and the project goals if the conflict and tensions that emerge are resolved and the group uses the learning to improve its work.

Conflict can also be **negative** and adversely affect the success of the group. The solution is for the group to deal with its conflict constructively, before it becomes embedded, spreads and erodes the foundation to the point where it cannot carry on any longer.

Understanding conflict is important before you can deal with it effectively. Research tells us that conflict evolves through stages, involves an observable process and has a number of common characteristics. Recognizing and understanding what may be happening is the first step in resolving the situation effectively. Some conflicts can be avoided entirely, or at least kept from escalating, if you understand what is happening, your style and attitudes about conflict and its causes.

Key Elements are common to all conflicts, whether large or small.

- All conflict involves at least two parties — two or more people, two groups, two countries, a person and a group, a country and a group, etc.
- Some sort of struggle or threat, either real or suspected, exists.
- Interaction or interference takes place.
- The interaction may be emotional.

Stages of conflict are evident, and can be tracked as they occur.

1. **Tension Development** — Various parties start taking sides.
2. **Role Dilemma** — People raise questions about what is happening, who is right, what should be done. They try to decide if they should take sides, and if so, which one.
3. **Injustice Collecting** — Each party gathers support. They itemize their problems, justify their position and think of revenge or ways to win.
4. **Confrontation** — The parties meet head on and clash. If both parties hold fast to their side, the showdown may cause permanent barriers.
5. **Adjustments** — Several responses can occur, depending on the relative power of each party:
 - **domination** — when one party is weak and the other strong
 - **cold war** — neither party decides to change, but attempts to weaken the other
 - **avoidance** — one party may choose to avoid the other, while the conflict continues
 - **compromise** — each party gains a little and loses a little
 - **collaboration** — active participation resulting in a solution that takes care of both parties' needs

Only **collaboration**, and sometimes **compromise**, resolves the conflict over time. In society today, other adjustments are, at best, short-term solutions. If *resolution* means domination, cold war or isolation, the cycle of conflict may continue forever.

GUIDELINES FOR RESOLVING CONFLICT

To help resolve conflict within your group, consider and adopt the following principles. Several strategies are suggested that confirm your commitment to the process of finding a reasonable solution.

Underneath incompatible positions lie compatible interests.

- Dig for and reach the compatible interests.

Every side usually has something valuable to say.

- Listen to both sides equally, and hear the valuable contributions.

Issues become polarized when there is little or no dialogue.

- Initiate discussion and dialogue, encouraging participation.

High emotions charge the issue.

- Create an environment where people can express their feelings and concerns.

Parties will focus on differences

- Ask them to identify areas they have in common, remind them and express progress.

Parties may become defensive and protect, justify or explain their position.

- Search for solutions: seek to understand but remind them of the need to move on.

Parties will immediately want to discuss their individual needs.

- Only when contact, and *good will* have been established, should needs be discussed.

Parties often feel their story has not been heard.

- Listen to each parties' needs, and ensure each party listens to the other.

Identifying and understanding the desired outcomes will result in progress.

- Step back — ask the parties what they want the outcome to be, and list the desired outcomes.

Conflict creates emotions and feelings that are barriers to progress.

- Take stock *here and now*, identify and understand the emotions, and move the discussion to approaches, strategies and desired outcomes.

WHAT'S YOUR STYLE?

Most people have a dominant method or style of dealing with conflict. In some cases, that style may be appropriate, but it may not be, depending on the situation. In most cases, the best style to use is one that achieves an acceptable solution to both parties. This is a collaboration style, and to a lesser extent, a compromising style. This list of styles

describes the five most common styles people use to deal with conflict. Which one describes you best?

1. Avoiding (unco-operative and unassertive)

Your customary manner is to be passive and withdraw from conflict situations. Your most frequent attitude is to be accepting and patient, often suppressing your strong feelings to avoid confrontation. This type of behaviour usually victimizes one's self, and tends to make it difficult for others to know there is a problem.

Avoiding can be useful when: an issue is trivial, you have no chance of getting your way, potential harm outweighs the benefits, you need time to let people cool down.

2. Accommodating (co-operative and unassertive)

You try to satisfy the other person's concerns at the expense of your own. You strive to understand, listen and put yourself in the other person's place. The mood is often co-operative and even conciliatory.

An accommodating style may be useful when: you know you are wrong, as a gesture of good will, to build favours owed, when you are clearly losing, when harmony is very important.

3. Competing (unco-operative and assertive)

You use direct tactics and have a strong need to control the situation and/or people. You want to straighten out the other person, to argue about who is right, and are ready to defend your ideas forcibly. You use whatever seems appropriate to win.

This style may be most useful and effective in emergencies, discipline, enforcement of unpopular rules, when doing unpopular things that must be done.

4. Collaborating (co-operative and assertive)

You work with the other person to find a solution that fully satisfies both sides. You are ready to defend a stand without being too pushy. You are willing to work toward a mutually agreeable solution through negotiation. Verbal skills are used to move the discussion forward.

This style is helpful when: both sides are important, learning something new is important, to merge insights, buy-in from others is important, to deal with hard feelings.

5. Compromising (intermediate in co-operating and assertiveness)

You work to seek a middle-ground solution for both parties. The solution provides partial satisfaction for both, but in the interest of time and a lack of commitment or effort to do better, this will do.

This style is most helpful when: neither side is very important, power on both sides is equal, to arrive at the best solution because you are pressed for time, as a back up when other ways fail.

CONFLICT WORKSHEET

Think of a difficult situation in this group or another where you have been involved and wanted to have resolved more positively. Write down your observations and understanding of the situation:

The problem (2 to 3 sentences)

Who was involved? Who are the main parties?

What actually happened?

What did you want to happen?

THE THREE STEPS TO EFFECTIVELY DEAL WITH CONFLICT ARE:

1. Define the situation, the facts, the aim or outcome (recognize and define).
 - Review the immediate environment.
 - Assemble information.
 - Describe the situation.
 - Specify the outcomes.
2. Search for alternatives and their implications (generate alternatives)
 - Create choices (reach beyond "either/or" solutions).
 - Identify as many feasible solutions as possible.
 - Assemble criteria to evaluate choices.
 - Assess alternatives: advantages, disadvantages, implications and consequences.
3. Make a decision (choose a solution).
 - Select the most appropriate solution.
 - Determine implementation plans — who does what by when?
 - Follow up on tasks assigned or agreed upon.
 - Evaluate the solution and whether or not it is working.

WHAT'S CAUSING THIS CONFLICT?

There are five main sources of conflict between two parties. Knowing these root causes may help to determine what's needed by either or both of the parties to resolve the situation.

Techniques for Dealing with Challenging Personalities

In many cases, conflict can arise between two people or parties because of the personalities involved. Here are several strategies for dealing with challenging personalities, followed by descriptions and specific strategies for a number of the more common difficult personalities found in groups and organizations.

Assess the situation

Is the person genuinely difficult or just cranky for a short time?

Stop wishing the person were different.

You can't change it. It's not even a good idea to try.

Distance yourself from the difficult situation.

Develop a detached view. By giving yourself some distance, you get a better perspective.

"Keep your cool."

Don't defend or retaliate.

Formulate a plan to interrupt the situation and carry it through.

You can't change the behaviour of the other person, but you can change yours. Be prepared to adjust your strategy as you go along.

If your strategies for coping don't work, stop your efforts for the time being.

Don't let the situation do you more harm.

Keep it all in perspective.

Consider the source, the importance of the issue and if others see it as a problem.

Root Problem	Possible Causes
1. Values (often the most difficult to resolve, due to the deep-rooted nature of the situation)	• assumptions about the other person's values • real differences in values • not checking assumptions about values • mistaking behaviour for values • seeing a difference between the person's behaviour and what they say are their values • values are not disclosed • different ways of life, ideology and/or religion
2. Resources	• two or more entities competing for what are assumed to be limited resources • perception of unequal control, ownership or distribution of resources • geographic, physical or environmental factors hindering co-operation • time constraints
3. Interpersonal	• general lack of familiarity with others • stereotypes • failure to check assumptions about one another • behaviours perceived to be negative • unresolved disagreements • unstated interests • past negative encounters with the other party
4. Interests	• competing needs, desires or wishes • substantive, procedural or psychological interests perceived to be in competition
5. Facts	• lack of information • misinformation • different views on what is relevant • interpretation of differences • different assessment procedures

SPECIFIC PERSONALITIES AND STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH THEM

1. Complainers

Gripe incessantly but never try to do anything about their complaints.

May feel powerless to do anything or may refuse to bear the responsibility for a solution.

Strategies

- Listen attentively even though it may be very difficult.
- Acknowledge what the complainer says by paraphrasing the complaints.
- Don't agree with the complaints.
- Be prepared to interrupt and take control of the situation. Complainers love to ramble.
- Use limiting responses that pin the complainer to specifics.
- Avoid the accusation-defense-reaccusation sequence where you defend an accusation and then are reaccused.
- State the facts without comment and without apology.
- Switch to problem solving.
- Be prepared to begin this strategy from the beginning several times.

2. Indecisives

Can ruin a program because they put off decisions until it is too late to do anything about it.

Delay making a decision until the decision is made for them.

Won't let go of anything until it is perfect, which it never is.

Strategies

- Bring the issues out in the open and make it easy for them to be direct. Pursue all signs of indecision.
- Help them solve the problem(s).
- Place all the alternatives in rank of importance.
- Emphasize the importance of quality and service.
- If possible, keep control of what you are working on.
- Watch for signs that the pressure to make a decision may be overloading them.

3. Super-agreeables

Appear very reasonable, sincere and supportive, at least in your presence.

Often don't produce what they say they will produce.

Sometimes act contrary to what they have led you to expect.

Strategies

- Make honesty non-threatening. They are afraid you don't want to hear the truth.
- Be personable if you can and only if you mean it.
- Don't allow them to make unrealistic commitments they can't fulfil.
- Be prepared to compromise so you are both in a win-win situation.
- Listen to their humour. They often hide the truth there.

4. Negativitists

Object to everything.

Believe whatever you propose won't work or is impossible.

All too often completely deflate any optimism you might have for a project.

Strategies

- Avoid getting drawn into their attitude.
- State your own realistic optimism.
- Don't agree with them.
- Don't hurry to propose solutions.
- Use their negativism constructively. It never hurts to have a devil's advocate.
- Be prepared to take on the project with support from others if you can't change their attitudes.

5. Know-it-all Experts

Believe, and want you to believe, that they know all there is to know about anything worth knowing.

Are usually condescending, imposing or pompous.

Will try to make you feel inferior.

Strategies

- Do your homework on the subject.
- Listen to and acknowledge what they say.
- Question firmly, but don't confront. They hate being wrong.
- Avoid being a counter-expert.
- Let them be the expert they think they are.

6. Silent-unresponsives

Answer every question and every plea for help with a yes, a no, or a grunt and sometimes with an I-don't-know.

Strategies

- Ask open-ended questions.
- Use the friendly, silent stare.
- Pause for long periods, inviting them to fill the void.
- Comment on what is happening in the discussion.
- Recycle the conversation if necessary.
- Break the tension by helping them to say what they are thinking.
- Set time limits on the length of the discussion.

7. Hostile-aggressives

Try to bully and overwhelm you by bombarding you.

Make cutting remarks or throw temper tantrums when they don't get their own way.

Are convinced theirs is the only way.

Strategies

- Stand up for yourself, without being threatening.
- Give them time to run down.
- Get their attention, but don't startle them.
- Have them sit down; this will make them less aggressive.
- Speak for your own point of view; don't attack them.
- Avoid a head-on fight.
- Be friendly.

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